43.

What Does the TPLF Want in Eritrea? Nothing the Emperor and the Derg Didn't

Ethiopia's May 12 invasion of Eritrea, ostensibly to occupy disputed territories, had a far more sinister objective. As the rest of the world is slowly discovering, what was a routine border dispute two years ago has, evolved into a disturbing venue for an attempt to succeed where Emperor Haile Selassie and Colonel Mengistu failed—the subjugation of Eritrea. The invasion has revealed much more than the government of Ethiopia had intended. The current Ethiopian government's approach to Eritrea is indistinguishable from that of the Emperor's or, for that matter, the Derg's.

The invasion was replete with ironies. One of the world's poorest countries, with a per capita income of less than one hundred dollars, built sub-Saharan Africa's largest army, equipped with the latest military hardware and, outside of South Africa, an unrivalled air power capability. The financing of the invasion is unique, unlike anything the world has seen. This is the world's first invasion to be largely financed from diverted development and relief related assistance. The world has not witnessed a situation in which a country in need of food relief assistance to feed 10 million of its citizens has the gall to amass the largest army in sub-Saharan Africa for the sole purpose of invading its neighbor right under the nose of the international donor community.

The invasion was launched to put an end to Eritrea's seven-year old sovereignty by any means necessary: military, economic, social and political. Militarily the objective was to destroy Eritrea's defense capability. Politically, the intent was to overthrow Eritrea's government and to replace it with a puppet regime more amenable to Ethiopia. The hand picked regime would then be expected to make an arrangement with Ethiopia in which it would agree not to contest Ethiopia's seizure of Assab. Socially, the purpose was to destabilize the population by creating a massive humanitarian crisis inside the country.

Since the invasion began three weeks ago, 1.5 million Eritreans have left their homes. Another 55,000 are taking shelter in the Sudan. Economically, Ethiopia's new rulers have embarked on a systematic economic sabotage, including forcing people to leave the rich agricultural areas to hasten Eritrea's economic ruin. Why? To undermine the confidence Eritreans have in their government, a ploy the Emperor utilized to alienate the government of Eritrea from the public during the Federation years. The sabotage is also being carried out for the sadistic pleasure of seeing people suffer.

For anyone with a smattering knowledge of Eritrean history, nothing the TPLF is doing should come as a surprise. The Emperor and the Derg strove mightily, although unsuccessfully, to prevent the birth of a sovereign Eritrea. The TPLF, after paying lip service to the birth of Eritrea, is now trying to snuff the life out of Eritrea's sovereignty. Ethiopia's rulers, past and present, share a lust for the land although the TPLF's is probably more debilitating. All three have demonstrated that they would drive the people out of the country if that is the only way to control the land. To varying degrees all followed a scorched earth policy to drive people out of their land. The earliest stream of refugees treked to the Sudan in 1967 after the Emperor's army killed 300 civilians at Ad Ibrahim. Another 750 were killed at Ona in the outskirts of Keren. The Derg continued the Emperor's policy with a vengeance. Between 1974 and 1976 the Derg had killed 1379 civilians, including 360 who were executed in a mosque and another 110 killed in a church.

The TPLF has not had a chance to kill as many civilians as the Emperor and the Derg because the TPLF has not had the opportunity. Knowing TPLF's tendency for mayhem and destruction, people evacuated before the advancing army. Yet the TPLF has outdone the Emperor and the Derg in other ways. In a mere three weeks the TPLF's invasion has sent 55,000 to Sudan and another 150,000 are waiting in the wings. In three weeks the TPLF has generated 1.5 million internally displaced people, a figure neither the Emperor nor the Derg could match in their combined 39 years rule of Eritrea.

The similarity among the three regimes is striking. The purposeful social and economic dislocation have the hallmarks of previous Ethiopian rulers of Eritrea, except the TPLF has been brutally more efficient than Emperor Haile Selassie and Colonel Mengistu. All three share something in common: a pathological jealousy of Eritrea's economic progress and an obsessive compulsion to drag it to Ethiopia's level. In the 1950s, at the time of the Federation, the Emperor could not stomach that Eritrea was more economically advanced than his beloved Shoa and its decrepit capital, Addis Ababa. He made sure Eritrea was brought to Shoa's level in less than ten years. Mengistu continued the emperor's politics of envy by grounding Eritrea's economy to the floor. The TPLF came to power with a huge chip on its shoulder about Tigray's underdevelopment, and immediately sought to remedy the situation at Eritrea's expense. The assault on Eritrea's infrastructure and industrial and agricultural enterprises that have come in the wake of the invasion is a well thought out plan to economically cripple Eritrea.

The TPLF learned the art of economic sabotage from the Emperor, except the former's approach was crude and the Emperor's was infinitely more subtle. After all it was the Emperor who wrote the book on how to sabotage Eritrea's economy. During the fifties, the Emperor purposefully intervened to weaken Eritrea's industrial and commercial base through an unwarranted double taxation that favored Ethiopia based enterprises. Subsequently many enterprise owners were forced to relocate to Addis Ababa. The Derg nationalized all remaining Eritrean industries. The Emperor used them as cash cows, without bothering to replace old machinery and equipment or to invest in new ones. The purpose was to transfer as much revenue as possible to finance his war against the Eritrean liberation movements.

Following in the footsteps of its predecessors, the TPLF resorted to economic blackmail to force Eritrea to its knees. It put in place an economic embargo against Eritrea during the last two years. The last three weeks since the invasion it moved to a more sinister phase. Through its brief occupation of western Eritrea, the TPLF's undisciplined army engineered the flight of 750,000 Eritreans from their farms and fields in Gash-Barka, an area that accounts for 60 percent of Eritrea's agricultural production. The invading army looted the towns and hamlets it occupied, in the old Abyssinian tradition made popular by Menelik II's and Ras Alula's marauding armies.

In Teseney alone the retreating Ethiopian forces caused 40 million dollars of damage. They detonated machinery and equipment they could not carry. They vandalized a cotton farming project in Ali Ghider. A development project as a military target is insidious for it implies an all-encompassing objective that includes denying Eritreans the means of economic sustenance. The bombing of the power plant at Hergigo and the Asmara Airport are well thought out targets to do serious damage to Eritrea's economic infrastructure.

What the destruction of Eritrea's economic infrastructure has to do with a routine border dispute is anybody's guess. But the logic, although it's twisted, is not different from what the Emperor and the Derg employed: to deny Eritreans the means of economic independence; to teach them a lesson they have no need of learning because it's false lesson. Economically Eritrea can survive without Ethiopia. Of course, the fact that Eritreans know they can is what drives Ethiopia's rulers, past and present, to acts of desperation. The May 12 invasion is the latest manifestation of a terminal act of desperation.

June 9, 2000